

A Biography of and Interview with Carolyn Foster Comans, DVM

Class of 1960, College of Veterinary Medicine, Cornell University

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and Jennifer K. Morrissey '13

A Life Outside the Box

When Sister Mary Angelina asked her fifth-grade class to prepare an illustrated story to describe their future career ambitions, Lyn Foster chose animals. *"All I could draw were cocker spaniels and horse heads, so I said that I would like to be a veterinarian."* When the nun unequivocally reported that women couldn't become veterinarians, *"The gauntlet was down"*. From that moment on, Lyn worked toward the goal of becoming a veterinarian. During her 50th reunion at Cornell University in June 2010, she proudly reminisced, *"I could have been a secretary, a teacher, maybe an M.D., but I got to be a veterinarian. It's great."*



©New York State Veterinary College Graduation Photograph

Carolyn F. Comans, 1960

Lyn appeared before Cornell's Admission Committee in 1956, during her second year of undergraduate studies at D'Youville College in Buffalo. Like other women of the period, she was asked if she could sew and, more specifically, if she had made the dress that she wore for the interview. *"Yes! Yes, I did!"* she proclaimed proudly, explaining that the dress had been made from the patterned cotton of feed sacks that were meant to be redeployed for domestic use. She was accepted.

Lyn was born in the small town of Olean in western New York, and grew up in nearby Randolph. Her parents, both of whom were in the health care field, raised their two children in a supportive environment where going to college was just expected. As her father—a medic who would have been a physician except for the Depression—was driving Lyn to Ithaca to start veterinary college, he pointed from across Cayuga Lake to Cornell's distinctive bell tower and pronounced, *"That's your future!"*

Cornell was special to Lyn because, unlike many other outstanding universities in those days, it accepted women. In fact, there were four women in her class representing the largest female enrollment in many years. Because construction of the new and more spacious veterinary college at the east end of campus was behind schedule, the 60 first-year students—ten more than had been admitted in previous years—were compressed into the old James

Law Hall for the freshman course in veterinary anatomy. Locker facilities were unavailable for women, so she and her female classmates either had to post a guard and temporarily use the men's bathroom, or cross the street to the Statler Hotel bathroom, to change out of their formaldehyde-impregnated dissection clothing.

Despite restrictions for women that would seem archaic today—one Ambulatory professor, for example, announced that neither “*girls nor Jews*” would be allowed on farm calls with him—Lyn made the most of her relationships with both faculty and fellow students, and graduated proudly on schedule in 1960. She practiced initially in Buffalo and then married a veterinarian from the class before her. They moved to Long Island and established the St. James Animal Hospital in Suffolk County. Lyn and her husband, Edmond Comans, owned and operated the small animal hospital for over 40 years, ultimately selling it in 2001 when they relocated to central Florida.

Dr. Comans never let herself become boxed-in, always seeking new professional adventures, whether it was developing one of the first avian services on Long Island in the early 1970s, or developing an acupuncture practice after they relocated to central Florida. “*Her wonderful ability to work with clients, to wisely explain appropriate medical options under the most challenging situations, is one of her great attributes,*” her husband and St. James Hospital partner remarked during her recent Cornell reunion. “*She is just a superb veterinarian.*”

Though she entered the profession at a period when women veterinarians were starting to grow in numbers and influence, Dr. Comans chose not to align herself with the Association for Women Veterinarians. She felt that her influence and impact should be as a veterinarian, without being in a cohort defined by some “*accident of birth.*”

She and her husband raised four children who have been a great joy and a wonderful blessing. Lyn also became a strong and influential alumni leader at Cornell, and had the distinction of serving as president of the college's Alumni Association in 1993, the year that ground was broken for the new Veterinary Medical Center. She was also on the college's Development Committee where she and Ed led by example, providing generous financial support for student scholarships and their class funds.

Fifty years after graduation and still being invigorated daily by the profession she loves, the family she supports, and the colleagues and clients she admires, Dr. Lyn Comans is a living testament to a life which has no borders.

“I loved being a veterinarian. I loved practicing. I’m not going to say every single morning I was happy to get up and go to work, but overall, I just loved it. It was different every day. It was creative.”

Interview

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Subject: Carolyn F. Comans, DVM
Interviewers: Dr. Donald F. Smith and Ms. Jennifer K. Morrissey
Interview Date: June 11, 2010
Location: Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine



©Photograph by Donald F. Smith

Dr. Carolyn F. Comans, June 2010

Interviewer's Note:

We had the privilege to interview two of the three women graduates from the Class of 1960 during their 50th reunion celebration at Cornell in June 2010. I had known both Dr. Comans and Dr. Thomson¹ for many years, and was thrilled that they were each willing to reflect upon their adventures in veterinary medicine, starting from their earliest recollections. Joining me for this interview was Class of 2013 student, Jennifer K. Morrissey, who had been working with me for the summer to expand and refine the legacy collection. As is often the case, working in the presence of a current veterinary student improves the quality of discussion and adds cross-generational perspective to the discussion. (Donald F. Smith)

¹ Patricia L. Thomson Herr '60, originally from Scotia; currently resides in Lancaster, Penn.

Dr. Donald Smith:

This is Donald Smith. It's June 11th, 2010 during reunion at Cornell University. Dr. Lyn Comans, Class of 1960, is here to share her stories about becoming a veterinarian and her life as one. Thank you very much, Lyn, for joining us.

Dr. Carolyn (Lyn) Comans:

You're more than welcome. My journey here started, of course, as a child. I was raised in Randolph, Cattaraugus County, in Western New York State. Not an area of great economic or intellectual burgeoning that I recall or I think of today, but I believe my parents were quite progressive. My father had been in medical school (pre-med), but had to come home because of economic difficulties. He was a medic in the Second World War and he thought very highly of the healing professions. My mother—for those days, it was quite unusual—had actually gone to a training school and was a dental hygienist. So, from the beginning, they never spoke of, '*If you go to college*,' it was always, '*When you go to college*.' There was no question that we would go to college.

One of my early experiences was in the fifth grade. I had a nun, Sister Mary Angelina, a woman of strong opinions and rigid pokers—they weren't actually pokers, they were pointers—asked us to write a paper on what we would be when we grew up. It had to be illustrated. I could only draw cocker spaniels and horse heads. Therefore I said, "*I would like to be a veterinarian*." She looked at the paper, and said, '*Well you can't do that! Women can't do that*.' The gauntlet was down. From there on, it was just, '*That's what I'm going to do*.'

In high school, we had an agriculture teacher, Matthew Escalé. Of course, women were not allowed to take that either, but I did interview with him. He did not encourage me [in my veterinary pursuit], but what he said was, '*Cornell is a fair and honest place. If you belong there, they'll accept you*.' And I took that, and I ran with it.

I went to a French convent school for two years to prep.² It was a great liberal arts education, and Sister Superior was very anxious that one of their students should go to Cornell. So they accommodated me with physical chemistry and physics in place of History of the Church or some of those other courses. My marks were good, and I took my preliminary exam in a snow storm in Buffalo, then came up here [to Cornell] for an interview.

Dr. Smith:

Your undergrad was where?

² Cornell required two years of college education before being admitted to the four-year veterinary program.

Dr. Comans:

D'Youville College. At that point, it was a French convent boarding school [in Buffalo]. They had a strong nursing course and my mother wanted me toned down a little bit. I think she wanted me to have a liberal arts education.

Dr. Smith:

How would that compare with the education of your classmates who had two years of agriculture?

Dr. Comans:

I think I benefitted because I had both a liberal arts and the specific education.

My interview day was quite interesting. A classmate of mine, Steve Dey,³ preceded me into the interview, wearing his FFA jacket,⁴ which he still has! When it was my turn, I went in and there was an array of gentlemen. Dr. Danks was there for sure,⁵ I think Dr. Brunner⁶ was there, but I'm not 100% sure of that.

I know Dr. Danks was the primary questioner, and I was sitting there in my great pride, and I wore a dress I had made myself. In those days, animal feed came in patterned cotton bags and you could take those bags and make something. A pot holder may have been more appropriate, but I made a dress!

So I was sitting there, so proudly, in my handmade dress and Dr. Danks said, '*Did you make that dress?*' And I said, '*Yes! Yes, I did.*' And he said, '*Did you make it out of a feed sack?*' I said, '*Yes! Yes, I did.*' And I got in! I don't know if he was appalled by those answers or pleased by those answers, but I was accepted into the school.

I can remember driving to Cornell from Olean, down the west side of Cayuga Lake, and my father pointing across at the bell tower⁷ and saying, '*That's your future.*' In those days—it's hard to remember that now—but I couldn't have gone to another school that was outstanding. Only Cornell took women. Notre Dame didn't; Princeton didn't. The teachers' colleges did and the women's colleges did. The Catholic women's colleges did. But I could not have gone to another school of quality, only this one.

³ Stephen P. Dey '60, originally from Allentown, N.J., where he currently resides.

⁴ Future Farmers of America.

⁵ The Admissions Committee at that time consisted of Dr. A. Gordon Danks '33, professor of surgery and director of the Large Animal Hospital, and usually 4-6 other faculty.

⁶ Dorsey W. Bruner '37, PhD, professor of veterinary bacteriology.

⁷ Cornell's most distinctive landmark, visible from across Cayuga Lake.

I started here as a freshmen, in the freshmen dorms, where we (the women students) had to live on campus for two years. We could eat in Balch.⁸ I used to take great pride in the fact that the three of us—the three women veterinarians who ate in Balch—had our own table.⁹ Well, who was going to sit with the smelly people like us? You know, it took me a while to catch on that it wasn't that we were important, it was that we smelled bad!

Dr. Comans:

We had to be on the meal plan. They eventually let us include Martha Van (Rensselaer) and the Dairy Bar in our breakfast meal plan because it was hard to get all the way over to Balch and then all the way up here to the new veterinary campus. That's a gallop!

That was the last year in the old school.¹⁰ We were the last class in the old school. It was an interesting building because there were no facilities (bathrooms) for women. We would have to go over to the Hotel School, where they certainly didn't want us to go in our anatomy clothes. Or we could go upstairs to the secretary's bathroom, which was just a stall, but they didn't want us there in our anatomy clothes. Sometimes, somebody would stand guard at the men's room and we'd all run in there. Of course, then he'd stop standing guard and everybody would laugh. That was the funniest thing ever. When we moved to the new school [in 1957], my big thrill was that there were women's bathrooms all over the place!¹¹

First year was a good year; I learned a lot. It was the first time I really had to work at my academics. I did not come out high [academically] that year. Moving up to the new school, we had to cut the class, I think, by 14 students. If they had cut it by 15, I think I would have gone. But there were 14 of my classmates who left that year at the low end of the [grade list], though some of them did come back in subsequent years.¹²

The fourth girl in our class left that year to marry her husband who was in the Army.¹³ The other three of us stayed through the four years and were, and still are, very good friends. The new school was a longer walk, but it certainly was a phenomenon. As the first class in there, we were pretty hot stuff wandering around these halls and looking at all the buildings.

⁸ Balch Hall, dormitory.

⁹ Four women veterinary students started in the fall of 1956, but only three were living in the dorms.

¹⁰ The veterinary campus consisted of a series of buildings on central campus until 1957, when a new set of buildings was built at the east end of campus. Though several buildings have been added since 1957, this remains the site of the present veterinary college campus.

¹¹ Another description of the bathroom issue is described in the interview with classmate Dr. Patricia Thomson Herr, elsewhere in this collection.

¹² According to college records, the number of students who didn't return after year one wasn't quite that high, but the impact was dramatic nonetheless. Another reference to this issue is included in the interview with classmate Dr. Robert D. Phemister, elsewhere in this collection.

¹³ Sandra Marie Mosher, originally from Elmira, N.Y.

I remember my professors well, for example, Dr. Evans from the old school.¹⁴ As we were coming in for an interview, he said, ‘*Would you like to see my tropical fish collection?*’ And we said, ‘*Oh! Yes!*’ And he took out a jar and poured them out in his hand. That wasn’t what I was thinking about!

Dr. Bruner was a fine gentleman, a great person to be around. Dr. Danks, Dr. Fincher,¹⁵ Dr. Fox,¹⁶ who certainly was an outstanding teacher. I liked poisonous plants a lot because I like plants and I like being outdoors. I’ll have to admit I had cut one or two anatomy labs to go on Dr. Rockcastle’s¹⁷ natural history tours out around the countryside. But, it took me, I would say, two years to acclimate, then also we moved into the practical phase. My marks began to come around, and I began to absorb the things I should’ve absorbed instead of just the phenomena of being at this big school.

I’m missing two fingers on my right hand. That happened when I was 18 months old. Under some circumstances, that might have been considered a problem. But because it happened when I was so young, it never was. I did well with my practical courses. I didn’t do badly in my academic courses, but I don’t think I was an outstanding academic student. I had difficulty passing the boards; it took me three tries to finally get the boards, but I got them.

My classmates were, for the most part, very nice people. You know, they’d give you a hard time every once in a while. But I would also say, as a woman at that point, we didn’t expect anything different. We expected to be shuffled aside though maybe not, sometimes, in the manner that we were. We were just so grateful to be here; we didn’t think to be defiant. We didn’t think to call in the Civil Liberties Union, or anything like that. We just thought, ‘*Keep your nose to the grindstone and get it done. You’re here.*’

I think our classmates began to respect us for that, because when I graduated, most of my classmates thought dearly of me. I dated some of them; at an occasional fraternity party, I was even engaged for 12 hours to a couple of them! But they were brief engagements.

My personal experiences with the professors were mostly good. Dr. Miller’s wife¹⁸ was involved in the 4H club and I was involved in the 4H club in Brooktondale. I was at their

¹⁴ Dr. Howard Evans, PhD ’44, professor of comparative anatomy; currently resides in Ithaca and continues to teach on occasion.

¹⁵ Myron G. Fincher ’19, MS, professor of veterinary medicine, director of the Ambulatory Clinic.

¹⁶ Francis H. Fox ’45, professor of veterinary medicine and obstetrics.

¹⁷ Verne N. Rockcastle PhD, professor, New York State College of Agriculture.

¹⁸ Mrs. Mary Miller, wife of Dr. Malcolm E. Miller ’34, PhD, professor and head of veterinary anatomy and sister-in-law of Dr. Albert P. Pontick ’39, whose interview is elsewhere in this collection.

house a few times for 4H promotions. I went to polo parties at Dr. Roberts' house¹⁹ that he had for the polo club.

We had a lot of fun on weekends. My roommate and I (classmate Sue Goddard)²⁰, lived together in an apartment that backed up to *Alpha Psi*.²¹ We were allowed to use their washing machine. I went in to use that washing machine one time and there was all this grease and lettuce in the washing machine. Bob Phemister,²² was in charge of the dinners in there, made tossed salad in the washing machine! So, we went in to use it and it was all full of oil and lettuce! But we had lots of fun and they were very good to us.

I didn't interact closely with the professors, none of the women did. There were a few ugly incidents, but most of the time they just more or less ignored us. Dr. Roberts was very good on ambulatory. I actually did a couple of ambulatory calls all by myself. He trusted me both to drive the vehicle and to give the cow a shot of penicillin. I think that trust was well-placed. Other ambulatory people would say, quite frankly, '*No girls or Jews in my car!*'²³ And we didn't go because they wouldn't have us. But I wasn't terribly upset. I realized it was improper. I realized that it was wrong for that to happen, but I wasn't terribly upset. I thought I would be fine without that, and indeed I was.

So I graduated. We had a nice graduation day. It was sunny; it was nice. My parents were proud and I was happy. I went to work in Buffalo in a small animal practice. But the week before I was to start, that man had suffered a major heart attack, so I went into a practice all by myself.

That's when I learned to love staff! If I was going to tell any practitioner anything, '*Love your staff*', because they guided me through this. He had a pharmacy with, maybe, 150 brown apothecary bottles that said things on them like, 'Joe's Formula,' 'Number Two Tonic.' There was heart tonic from Pitman-Moore, the only one I recognized! The staff guided me through that and he [the veterinarian-owner] was back in about a month. It was a quite basic practice.

After I graduated, they were starting to get specialty groups together. They wanted me to be in, and perhaps the president of, the Women's Veterinary Association.²⁴ I highly disapproved of that because I don't think that you should be separated by your accident of birth. I don't think there should be a white-skinned veterinary organization, or a gray-eyed veterinary

¹⁹ Stephen J. Roberts '38, professor of veterinary medicine and obstetrics; Dr. Roberts was a polo enthusiast and coach of the Cornell team.

²⁰ Susan Goddard Walter '60, originally from Larchmont, NY; currently resides in St. Louis, Miss.

²¹ *Alpha Psi*, veterinary fraternity.

²² Robert D. Phemister '60, originally from Webster Groves, MO; currently resides in Fort Collins, Col.

²³ Professor's identity withheld.

²⁴ Currently exists as the Association for Women Veterinarians Foundation.

organization, or a male-, or a female-veterinary [organization]. Those are accidents of birth and I don't think they should be a designation of yourself. So I didn't want to do it and I objected strongly to it. It's an organization that, maybe at that time, had value, but I don't think it's maintained itself very well. I don't think it's maintained itself as a power.

The man that I ended up marrying, from the class of '59, had a job with the New York State Racing Commission. We got married in '61 and moved to Long Island. We established a practice on Long Island, which we ran for about 42 years. We were very lucky because we came into the 'golden age of veterinary medicine'. We were well trained, we entered the profession when it was on the upswing, and when veterinarians were loved and respected members of the community. And they should have been!

I have four kids, three adopted children and one genetic child. And I raised them; we (my husband and I) raised them all. What I would say is, you can't have everything, and my choice was not to have a clean house. My children all had a college education and are all pursuing something in their lives. They were a great joy, a great joy! I just cannot say enough about my family life, which was a wonderful blessing. You know it sustained me many times when I was ready to say, '*Ah fooey*' on this whole thing. And the other way around; my professional life sustained me with my family life. So it's just yin and yang; I was very, very fortunate. There is nothing but good fortune in my life, really. I've been very lucky.

And I loved being a veterinarian. I loved practice. I'm not going to say every single morning I was happy to get up and go to work, but overall, I just loved it. It was different every day. It was creative. It was exciting. We got involved with the American Animal Hospital Association [AAHA] which, at that point, was innovative and creative. It was not primarily business practice and we learned a lot of things.

Through them, I got involved in avian work. Dr. Altman²⁵ had the largest avian practice, and I had probably had the second largest. I had a large avian practice before veterinarians were boarded, before there were boards. By the time the boards came around, I was not up to that level of writing papers and so on, so I was never boarded; it was only a special interest.

Dr. Smith:

I'm curious how you got into avian work.

Dr. Comans:

Well, because my father was a chicken farmer. I had a client on Long Island who had Boston Bulldogs. He asked me if I had ever done anything with pigeons. When I graduated, I felt I had a duty to all animals. So I said, '*Well, I've done a lot with poultry, I could take a look.*'

²⁵ Robert B. Altman '58, originally from Brooklyn, NY; currently resides in Boynton Beach, FL.

So, he began to bring me his racing pigeons. And when you start out with a species, basically, it's all husbandry, and it works up from there. So he began to bring me his racing pigeons.

Dr. Smith:

So this would be around 1970, or '75?

Dr. Comans:

I'm going to guess '70. So I began to work with the racing pigeons and because it was of interest to me, I charged him very little. His racing pigeons began to do very well and he kept bringing them back.

Dr. Smith:

What were you treating them for?

Dr. Comans:

Mainly, I was treating them for coccidiosis. The main thing was telling him not to put 400 in one coop! That was the major thing I was doing. And I got poultry water for him, sulfas, and his pigeons began to do well. I was very happy for the dear old man until I found out that they were betting tens of thousands of dollars on these pigeons. I was missing a lot!

Finally, he said to me once, *'You know, you've done good for me. I'm Chaciliano. Any time you want anything, let me know: one leg or two.'* And I thought, *'Oh my God! What am I doing? What am I doing?'* So, that's how I kind of got into it. And then I would go AAHA meetings. [They had one of the first avian continuing education programs I ever went to]. We took bird seed and counted how many millet seeds, how many this, how many that, and again, it was working on nutrition.

Through avian work, I got really interested in cellular diagnosis. I think a microscope is [the best diagnostic tool] next to your hands, even better than a stethoscope. Because of the avian work, I did what I would call cellular diagnosis. Talk about innovative stuff! I saw filariae, long before heartworm was showing up; I would see these filariae in cockatoos, in the blood. After the law was passed limiting imported birds, I started to stop seeing a lot of those things. I learned to sex birds by going in with a light. (I learned that from knowing how to caponize chickens as a kid.) I just found it interesting.

I've always liked something new and that's probably why I got into avian work. It's also probably why I got into acupuncture. I saw a few snakes back in those days. I used to treat some gerbils and some hamsters but they're going to die next year no matter what you do. So you'd explain to the people, *'These guys are supposed to have a short life. They're supposed*

to live a couple years, reproduce, and then get eaten by something else. So don't expect an awful lot. I can stop him from itching, but he's probably not going to make it much past the next year.' But I always liked to do something else. That was fun. I enjoyed it a lot.

We sold the practice in 2001 and I went to Florida. I was bored out of my mind so I got involved in acupuncture, which was being taught up in Gainesville.²⁶ I've now got a small acupuncture practice and I do *per diem* work in the Central Florida area. So I'm still practicing. I'm still doing what I love.

I'm just so lucky because I've maintained good health, moderate mental ability, and have had the opportunity just laid out in front of me. You know, I could have been a secretary, a teacher, maybe an M.D., but I got to be a veterinarian. It's great.

Be your best. Be your best. You can't do it every day. But everyday that you can, just be your best, whatever your level is. Do it to your very best ability. And, be proud.

That's the story.

Dr. Smith:

Thank you very much.

Dr. Comans:

You're welcome.

²⁶ At the University of Florida.